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JOB PROGRESS REPORT

RESEARCH PROJECT

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State: Montana

Project No. SE-1 Title: Statewide Endangered Species
Research

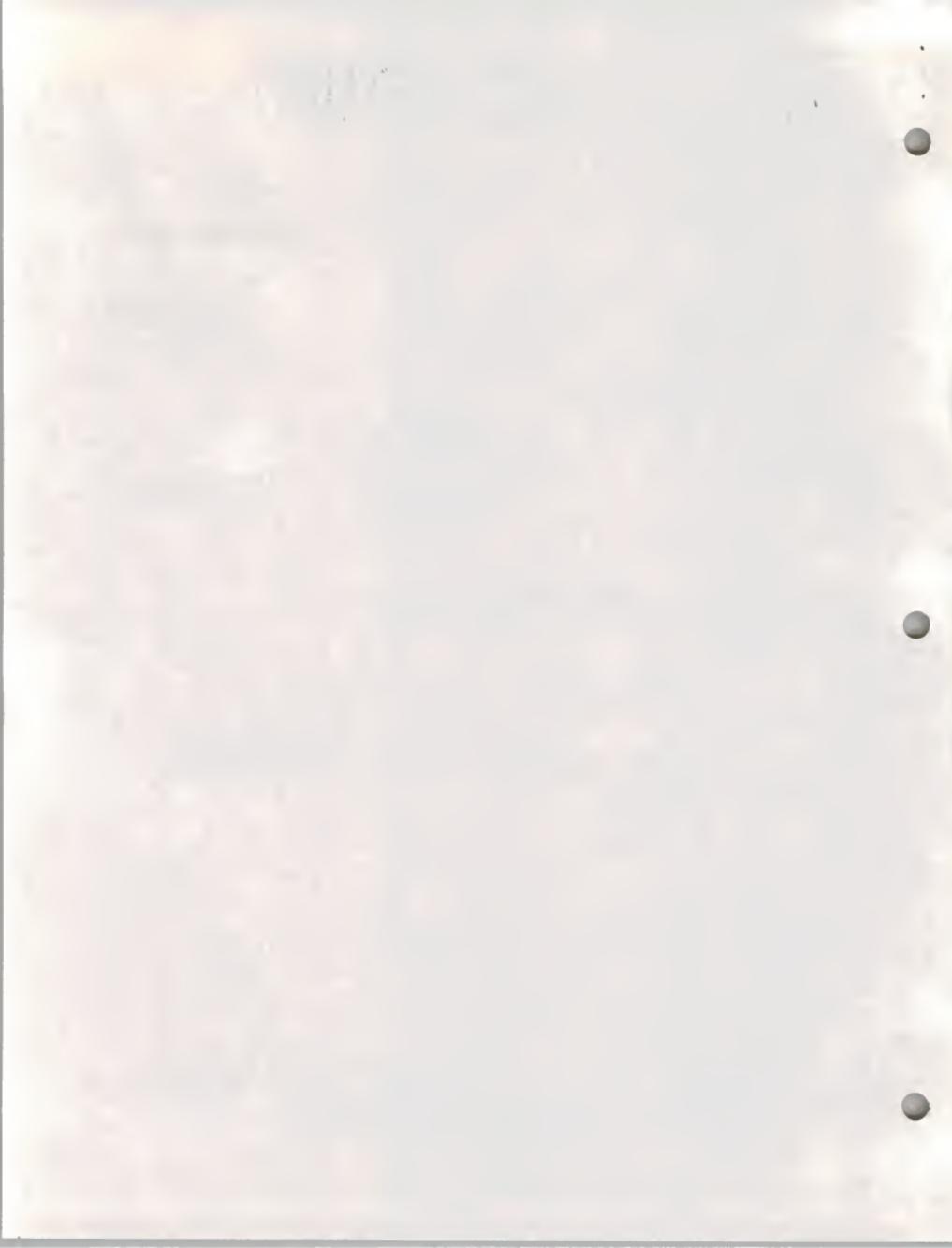
Job. No. 4 Title: Black-footed Ferret (Mustela
nigripes) Survey and Inventory

Period Covered: 1 September, 1986-30 June 1987

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Date: September 1, 1987

Since this is a Progress Report only, results presented herein are not necessarily final and may be subject to change. For this reason, the information contained in this report may not be published or used for other purposes without permission of the Director.



INTRODUCTION

The black-footed ferret (Mustela nigripes) is classified as endangered by both state and federal law. Reasons for their decline appears to have been related to the severe reduction of the ferrets principle prey, the prairie dog (Cynomys ludovicianus and C. leucurus).

The black-footed ferret is generally considered as facing a very high risk of extinction relative to other endangered species. Discovery of a population in Wyoming had given new hope that the species could be saved. In 1985, an epidemic of plague in the prairie dog colonies in Wyoming associated with canine distemper in the ferrets reduced the possibility of recovering the species. In the spring of 1987, however, two litters (total 8 young) were born in the captive population in Wyoming, again bringing new hope to the program.

During this reporting period, efforts were directed toward solving two primary problems: a) locate and define existing ferret populations and b) develop management programs which will meet the needs of agricultural interests while preserving or enhancing ferret populations and their potential habitats in Montana.

OBJECTIVES

To locate any black-footed ferrets which may occur in Montana and establish good working relationships with landowners whose lands include black-footed ferret habitat. Also, to identify, define, and develop management actions for at least one viable black-footed ferret population in Montana.

PROCEDURES

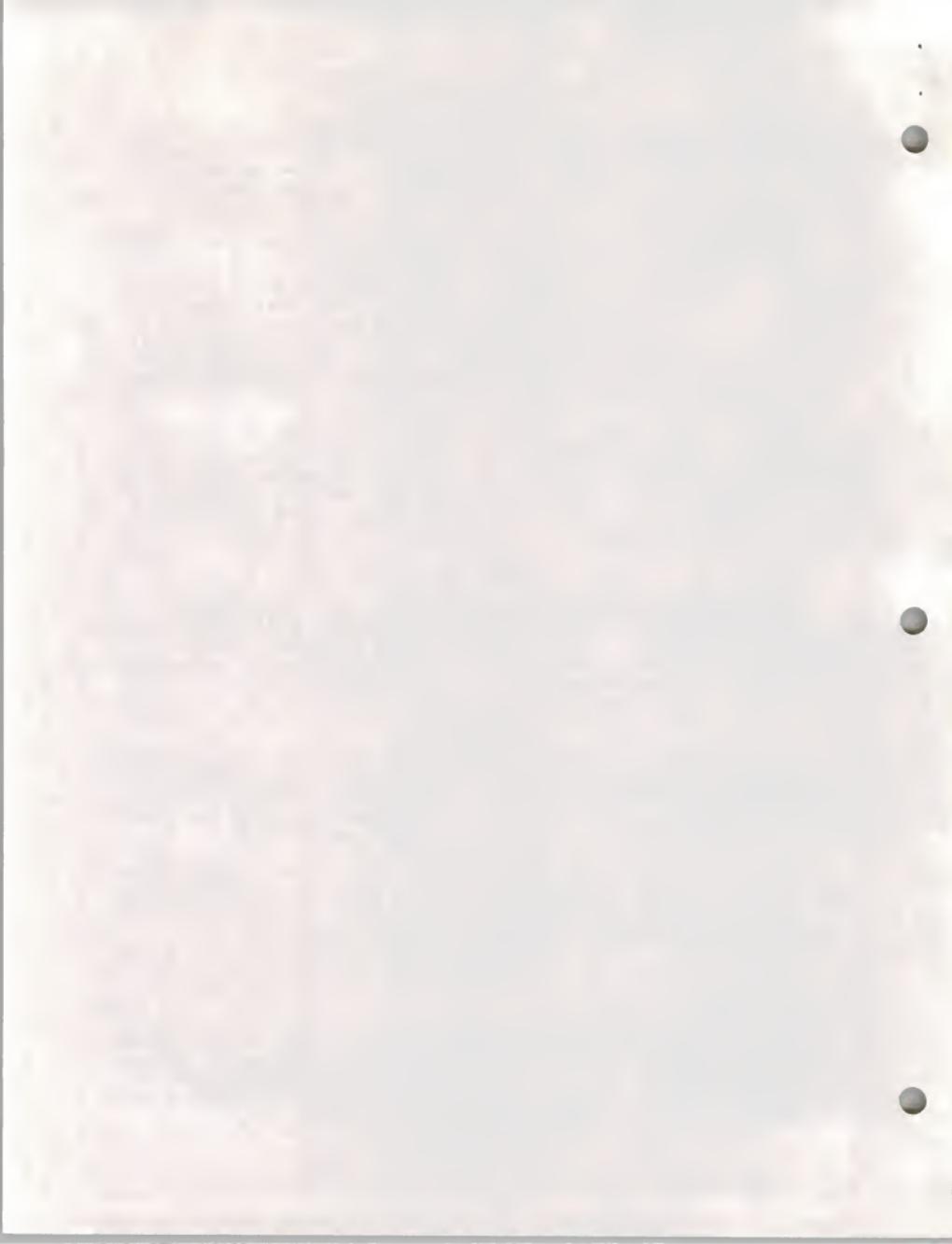
Study areas were prioritized based upon known prairie dog distribution, previous ferret reports, and willingness of associated landowners to cooperate. Each study area was surveyed using modern survey techniques (Clark et al. 1984). Surveys were conducted during the summer and winter periods.

The public relations phase of the project was continued. The purpose was to provide information relative to the ferret study, to identify some of the likely benefits, and to solicit recommendations, support, and cooperation.

RESULTS

Field Surveys

During February, 5,000 acres on 12 prairie dog colonies were surveyed for ferret activity in North Central Montana. Local ranchers and agency people were visited within the same area to help identify prairie dog locations and to obtain information concerning past prairie dog eradication programs.



In June, 6,000+ acres on 2 prairie dog colonies were surveyed for ferrets in northcentral Montana. In addition, 15 ferret reports were followed up on at various locations in eastern Montana.

No evidence of current ferret activity was obtained as a result of any of the field work. There is some circumstantial evidence of domestic ferrets living in the wild from reports in the Red Lodge area.

Habitat Evaluations

Using the Habitat Suitability Index developed by Houston et al. (1985), prairie dog complexes were tested as to their ferret habitat potential and compared to the ferret habitat at Meteteetsee, Wyoming. It was apparent that the habitat in the tested areas was suitable to support a ferret population. A final report of this analysis is available (Clark et al. 1986). The next phase of the project is to further evaluate suitable habitat and begin to develop the management plans for suitable sites.

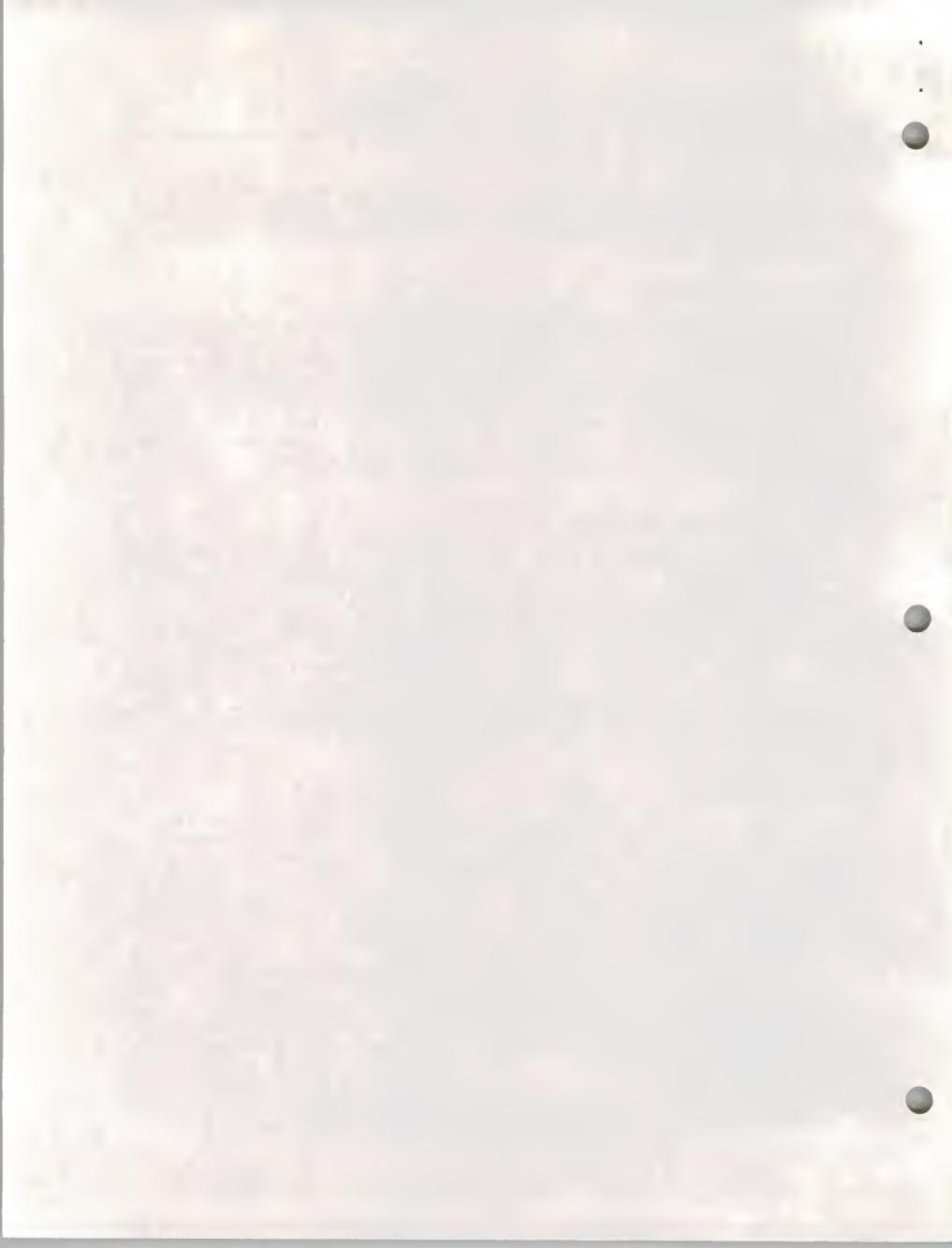
Reports and News Releases

Work was initiated on several reports and projects. Primary among these were an effort to determine genetic variability in black-footed ferrets though skull measurements as well as efforts to describe the organizational structure of the Montana ferret working group and how it has benefited our programs. Additional effort was also expended continuing to collate information on prairie dogs so that it would be readily available to land managers to assist them in maintaining ferret habitat. A video discussing the ferret program was prepared and distributed along with several news releases outlining progress on the ferret program and publicizing the reward program.

Reward Program

In an effort to obtain additional reports of possible ferrets in Montana the Department initiated a reward program. A reward of \$5000.00 will be paid to anyone who provides a photograph or information which results in the verification of one or more live black-footed ferrets in Montana. Money for the reward has been provided by Wildlife Conservation International, a division of New York Zoological Society.

There are many reasons why we proceeded with the reward program. There are currently 25 ferrets alive in captivity. The breeding season in 1986 was unsuccessful because some of the individuals were juvenile animals. Captive breeding efforts in the spring of 1987 resulted in 8 ferrets being born of which one subsequently died. Even so, because of the low numbers of individuals and the possibility that they are related, the genetic viability of the species is in question. Groups working on these problems have identified locating additional ferrets a



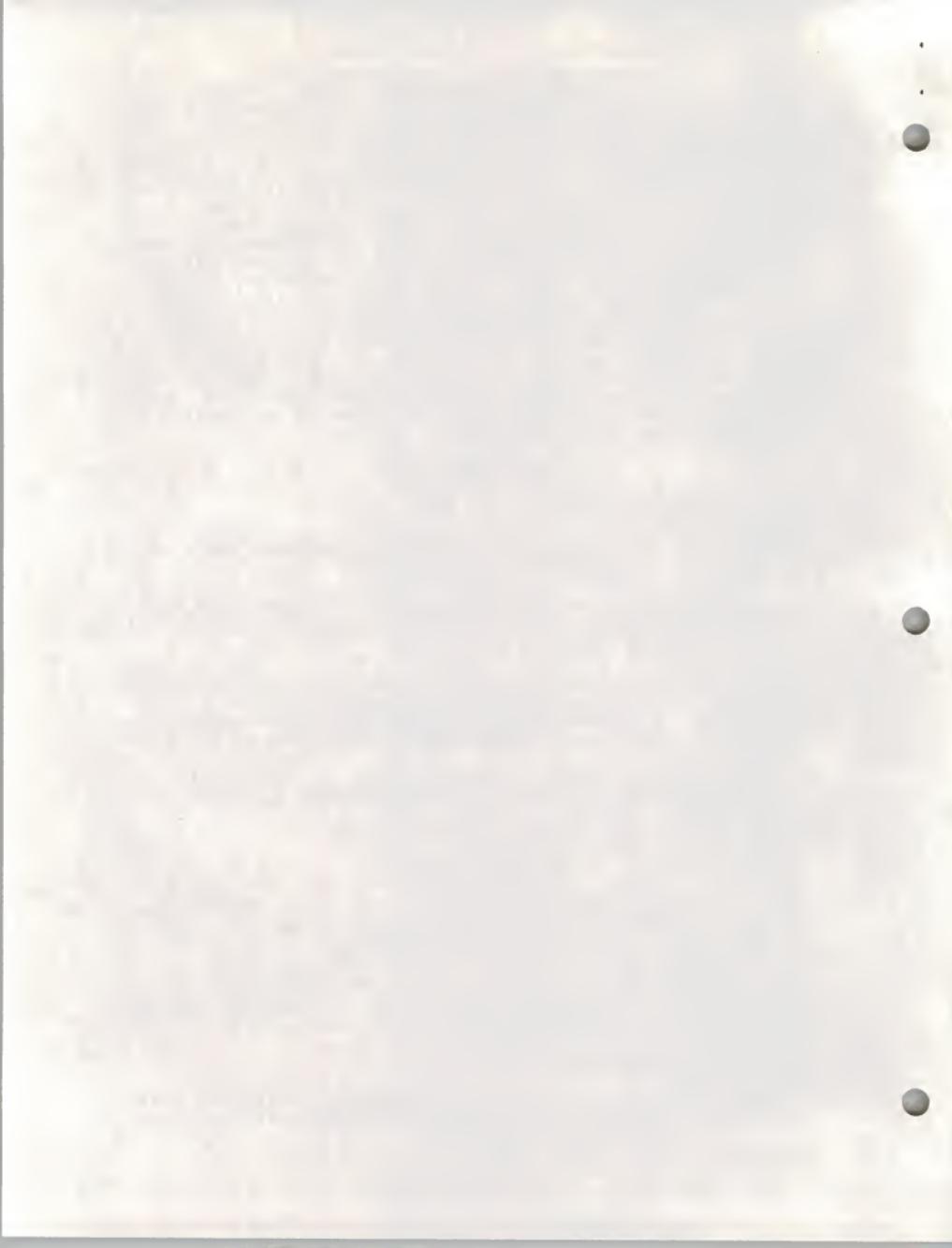
top priority (Captive Breeding Specialist Group). Because live ferrets were located in Montana in the late 1970s, and even though recent surveys have failed to locate any ferrets in Montana, we feel the potential of ferrets in our state does exist. Due to the importance of locating additional ferrets during the next two years, coupled with our manpower and budget limitations, it is our opinion that the reward program will be an effective tool in providing more and better ferret reports. We feel that by following up on good reports of ferrets generated through the reward incentive, we will be able to concentrate our limited manpower and budget on those areas with the greatest likelihood of having ferrets. This reward program offers a positive incentive to the public for assisting us in our effort to recover this species. The sooner additional ferrets can be located, the sooner we can meet our legal responsibility to recover this species. In order for the program to run smoothly and be effective, a variety of conditions have been placed on the reward, and recommendations are made for people interested in participating. Details of these are as follows:

CONDITIONS

1. The evidence must be obtained legally.
2. Permission to trespass on private lands must have been granted by the landowner or his agent.
3. When the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks follows up on a report, the person who made the report must assist with the verification.
4. The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks reserves the right to follow up only those reports which, by their criteria, provide the best details and substantive documentation of black-footed ferret occurrence in Montana.
5. The black-footed ferret is protected by both state and federal laws and must not be harassed, trapped, or killed.
6. This reward offer expires October 1, 1988.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Do not attempt to catch, detain, or harass a black-footed ferret. Such activities violate both state and federal laws.
2. Take a photograph if possible. All reports will be systematically evaluated, and only those ranked relatively high will be followed up.
3. Make your report immediately.
4. Handouts on survey and identification techniques are available from any of the seven Department regional



headquarters and at most Bureau of Land Management offices. A black-footed ferret survey training video is also available at the same locations.

And finally, to ensure that reports are treated equitably, a scoring system has been developed which provides for consistent evaluation and follow up of reports. To date, this system has resulted in 30+ possible ferret reports. The majority of these have proven to be animals other than ferrets. Some of these reports may actually have been of black-footed ferrets. However, they are as yet unverified.

Public Meetings

The focus of the public meeting effort shifted from one of conducting formal meetings to a situation where we attempted to visit with affected public on a one-to-one, informal basis. This has proven effective at more clearly understanding local concerns. As progress is made toward developing site-specific management plans, it is anticipated formal public meetings will again be held.

Agency Cooperation

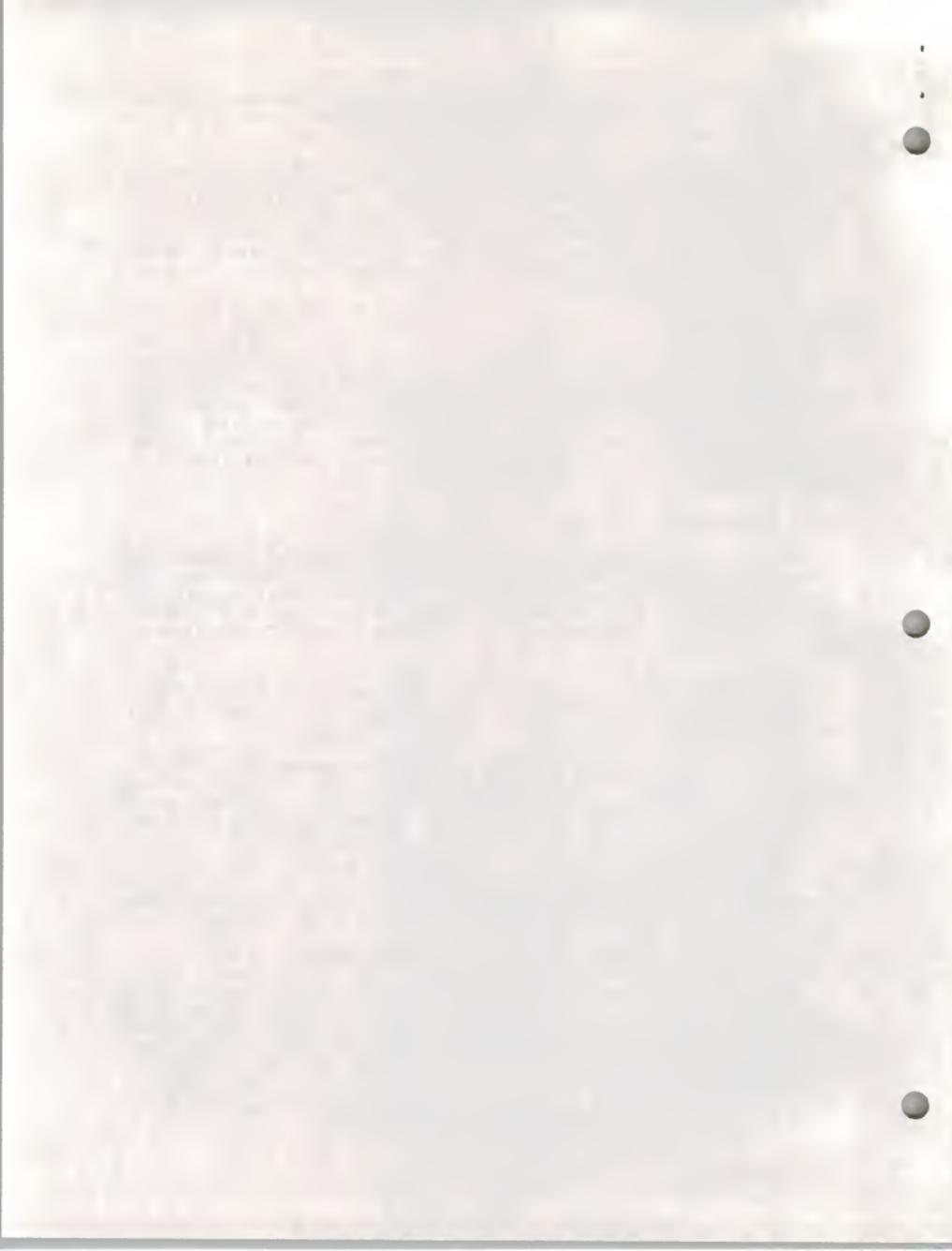
From the onset of this project, cooperation among interested and involved governmental agencies has been very good. Agencies actively cooperating with ferret recovery include: Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Montana Department of Agriculture.

Two interagency meetings were held to coordinate field activities, establish recovery priorities, and assign recovery tasks.

An interstate ferret working group with representatives from Montana, Wyoming, Utah, South Dakota, and the Denver Fish and Wildlife Service office was established in 1985. The purpose of this group is to coordinate activities among states, prioritize recovery sites, and standardize techniques. The first meeting of this group was held in July, 1987, at Billings, Montana. At this time, the Montana working group took an active role in explaining our programs. The current draft recovery plan recommends the Montana working group be used as a model for other states.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Initially, we made a two-year effort to search for ferrets in Montana. Prairie dog complexes were located and prioritized for ferret surveys. Ferret surveys were conducted during summer and winter periods by the Department and cooperating agencies. No evidence of ferret activity was obtained. Had the wild ferret population in Wyoming remained viable, the direction of Montana's effort would have changed to place emphasis upon preparations for reestablishment by reintroductions from Wyoming.



Since the Wyoming population consists of only 25 captive ferrets, it is recommended that Montana continue to search for ferrets. Even though the likelihood of finding any ferrets in Montana is small, it is our opinion that the need to add another ferret to the captive population is so great that it is most important to continue searching for ferrets.

Further, it is recommended that preparations for reintroductions continue to ensure preservation of viable habitat should the captive population survive and produce enough offspring for reestablishment in the wild.

LITERATURE CITED

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